

nami Montana

March 24, 2009

Montana Legislators,

NAMI Montana asks to you abolish the death penalty, because of the likelihood that it will be used against individuals who suffer from severe mental illness. NAMI Montana supports, educates, and advocates for Montanans suffering from severe mental illness and their family members. Severe mental illnesses are biological brain disorders that affect how an individual thinks, feels, and acts. People suffering from severe mental illness are more likely to be a victim of violence than a perpetrator. However, untreated biological brain disorders can cause terrifying hallucinations and other altered perceptions of reality with very real and tragic public safety consequences.

In a perfect world, individuals suffering from severe mental illnesses would receive effective treatment and would not present a danger to the public. However, we do not live in a perfect world. Montana's overburdened and under funded mental illness treatment system received a D grade in the NAMI's Grading the States evaluation. Further, Montana's civil commitment laws have been interpreted as only applying when there is an "imminent danger" that an individual is about to hurt themselves or someone else. The combination of the overburdened system and a commitment law which cannot provide help until the brink of danger is a recipe for tragedy.

When these tragedies do occur, studies suggest that defendants with severe mental illnesses who commit capital crimes are more likely to be sentenced to death than those without mental illnesses convicted of similar crimes. According to Ron Honberg, NAMI's Director of Policy and Legal Affairs, when people with mental illness do commit violent acts, they are frequently perceived as "monsters, with no redeeming qualities," rather than people whose actions "were responses to overwhelming delusions and hallucinations – such as voices that they were powerless to resist, commanding them to act in ways they never would have had they been in their right minds."

Crimes committed by individuals with biological brain disorders are testament to the failure of our mental illness treatment system. The execution of individuals with biological brain disorders who have been failed by that system is beyond cruel and inhumane.

Sincerely,

Matt Kuntz

Executive Director

NAMI Montana